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County seeks disaster status over beet damage

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The last ton of sugar beets will run through the slicer sometime this afternoon, bringing an average end to an enormous crop.

The Western Sugar Cooperative in Billings will wrap up its 2006-07 campaign with about 675,000 tons of sugar beets processed since the middle of September. That translates to about 105,000 tons of sugar for the 2006 crop.

"That is about normal for the past couple years," said Ken Bennett, factory manager for the plant on the south edge of town.

The slice could have been in the neighborhood of 900,000 tons of beets, he said. "The farmers said it was the best crop ever in their lives." But abnormal rainfall in September and October prevented a normal harvest and about 125,000 tons of beets were frozen in the ground in early November.

On Tuesday, Yellowstone County Commissioners passed a resolution asking the governor and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to declare a disaster for agriculture in the county. Other surrounding counties have made similar requests. If they are declared disaster areas, farmers who lost more than 30 percent of their crop will be eligible for low-interest loans.

"It hits each grower differently," said Everett Gabel, who farms west of Billings. "Some had insurance, others did not."

Gabel, who sits on the co-op board and is a member of the growers association, said the freeze was probably "a \$5 million hit to the farmers." He left 41 acres out of 300 unharvested. Using the recent good weather, he has disc plowed the beets under, preparing for spring planting of wheat and malt barley, Gabel said.

The disaster declaration information was prepared by the local Farm Service Agency emergency board, said Paul Dixon, the county agriculture Extension agent. The board consists of Dixon; Kevin Johnson, the FSA county executive director; and Valerie Robertson of the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

They determined that 57 sugar beet farmers with 1,396 unharvested acres in Yellowstone County might be eligible for the low-interest loans.

In Big Horn County, 120 producers lost about 1,700 acres, with individual losses ranging from 30 to 39 percent.

Carbon, Treasure and Rosebud counties have also forwarded loss information to county commissioners and the state FSA office.



LARRY MAYER/Gazette Staff

The sun rises over a sugar beet field that froze in the ground near Billings. About 125,000 tons of sugar beets froze last fall before they could be harvested.

In September, Billings-area farmers started harvesting a beet crop estimated to be about 29 tons per acre, compared with an average of 24-25 tons. But the unusual fall rains came and stayed, delaying harvest into late October and early November. Sustained freezing temperatures left about 15 percent of the 30,000 acres committed to the Billings factory frozen in the field.